

Hike Journal- April 26, 2004

The attached document recounts our experiences along the Napau Trail. The photos associated with the text are listed beneath each heading. Captions for some of the photos are highlighted.

Napau Trail

Early on the misty morning of Monday, April 26, 2004, twenty-one geology students and two of their professors met in front of the famed fireplace at the Volcano House hotel. After discussing the day's hike and making sure everyone had the necessary supplies (plenty of water, respirator, sunscreen, etc.), our convoy of SUV's headed down Chain of Craters Road to the Mauna Ulu parking area. By 8:30 am, we were ready to follow the much-anticipated Napau Trail.

According to the National Park Service, the Napau Trail is a challenging, 10-mile (one-way) hike from the Mauna Ulu parking lot to the Pu'u O'o (active vent) area. Other points of interest include:

- Pu'u Huluhulu Cone
- Lava flows from Mauna Ulu
- Makaopuhi Crater
- Napau Crater

What to Expect

When preparing to hike the trail, plan to spend all day hiking across rough lava terrain and through muddy rain forests. The park service requires hikers to obtain a backcountry permit before entering the area and recommends carrying 4-6 quarts of water per person. Expect rain and wind, and stay on the trail to avoid brittle lava that cracks easily.



Amber, Camille, and Sarah are well prepared

Trailhead

The trailhead leaves from the Mauna Ulu parking lot, about 7 miles from the Visitors Center. After shuffling vehicles, we finally left the parking lot at 8:30 in the morning.



Laura and Melissa anxious to hike



Rental SUV's take the place of the infamous geology vans

From the Trailhead

For the first section of the hike, we followed yellow markers attached to the lava surface.



Pointing out Mauna Ulu to the East

Pahoehoe and Kipukas

The first part of the trail crosses pahoehoe lava from eruptions in the early 1970's. "Pahoehoe," the Hawaiian term for "ropy," gets its name from its smooth, billowy texture. Ohia trees are the initial colonizers of these lava flows. The trail also leads through the occasional kipuka, an "island" of vegetation surrounded by younger flows.



Lava Trees

West of Pu'u Huluhulu, numerous lava trees and tree molds are scattered along the trail. Lava trees are formed when lava flows surround a standing tree. The lava level later recedes, leaving lava trees as tall monuments indicating the highest lava level, and the hollow center marking the size of the tree. Tree molds are the horizontal equivalent. When lava surrounds a downed tree, steam from the tree quenches the lava, often leaving the imprint of charred wood.



Riley precariously looks down into a tall lava tree

Pu'u Huluhulu

About one mile from the trailhead, the trail splits and leads up Pu'u Huluhulu, ("Hairy Hill" in Hawaiian). It required briefly hiking uphill, but the shade of the large trees that give the hill its name was welcome after walking across the sparsely vegetated lava.



The trail to the overlook breaks off to the north

The Overlook

We reached the viewing area at the top of Pu'u Huluhulu at 9:00 and took a few minutes to look around.



To the south lies the vent of the Mauna Ulu shield, which erupted from 1969-1974.



Mauna Loa, one of the main shield volcanoes, is seen to the west, partly mantled in clouds.

A View of Pu'u O'o

Pu'u O'o was visible along the rift zone to the east. The distant vent could be seen spewing sulfur and steam.



The shield vent visible just to the right of Pu'u O'o is the prehistoric Kane Nui O Hamo.

Pu'u Huluhulu to Makaopuhi

Seeing Pu'u O'o in the distance gave us a renewed sense of how far we still had to hike, and we headed back down Pu'u Huluhulu and rejoined the main Napau Trail. The second segment of the trail leading to Makaopuhi continued east across pahoehoe from the 1973 and 1974 Mauna Ulu eruptions.



The trail is marked by anu, or small cairns of piled rock.

Flow Features

We encountered many lava flow features along the trail, including pressure ridges and plateaus, inflated cavities and low spots in-between



Sarah walks through a depression in the flows.

Steam Fields

Around 10:00, we encountered a large field of steam along the trail. With all the warnings about sulfuric vog, some of us were at first hesitant to walk through the surreal steam, but were soon enjoying the steam bath and taking plenty of pictures. The steam rising from the surface of the lava results from the evaporation of heated rainwater.



Students continue to hike through clouds of steam.

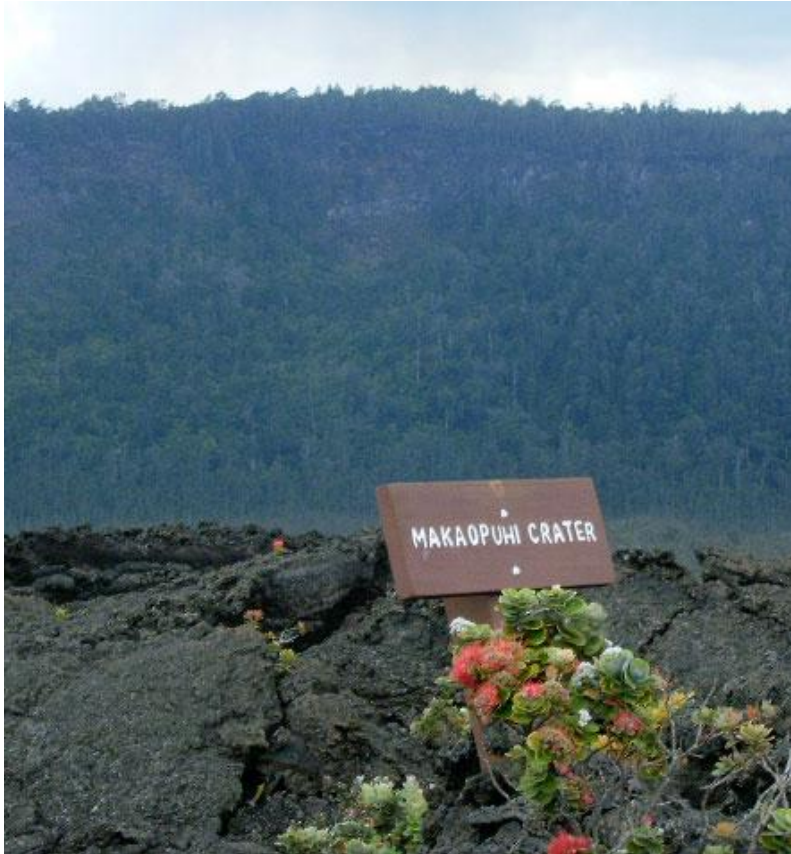




Camille, Ashley, and Elizabeth enjoying the mid-hike sauna experience.

Makaopuhi Crater

We reached the southwest rim of Makaopuhi Crater at 10:45 and took time to enjoy the scenery and pay homage to geologic history. Drilling on the crust of the Makaopuhi Lava Lake began in 1959 and revealed valuable information regarding the sequence of cooling and solidification of lava. The subsurface is still warm, so putting a hand over the drill holes yielded a blast of hot air.



Kane Nui O Hamo, a shield truncated by the crater.

The crater, at a mile long and half that wide, was a breathtaking sight. The floor of the crater is now 430 feet down, but was deeper before being filled in with almost 300 feet of lava.



A breathtaking panorama of the crater.

Into the Woods

After a 15-minute break to enjoy the vista at Makaopuhi, we followed the trail into a rain forest of ohia trees and hapuu ferns. The shade was welcome, but avoiding the mud was a challenge that soon became futile.

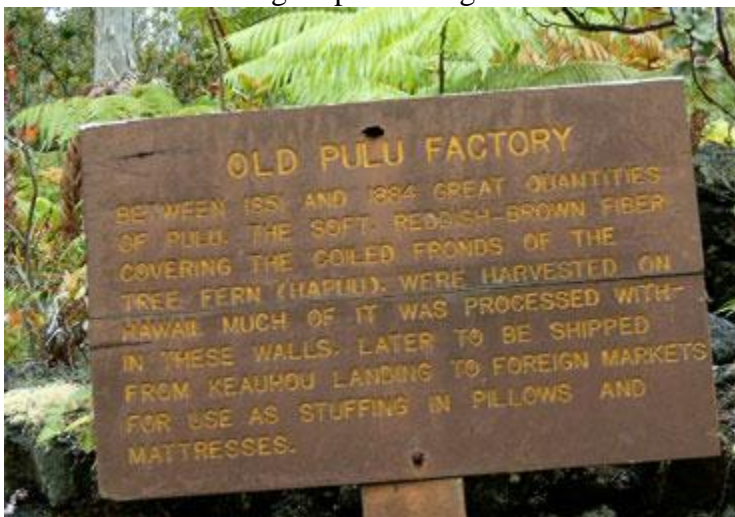


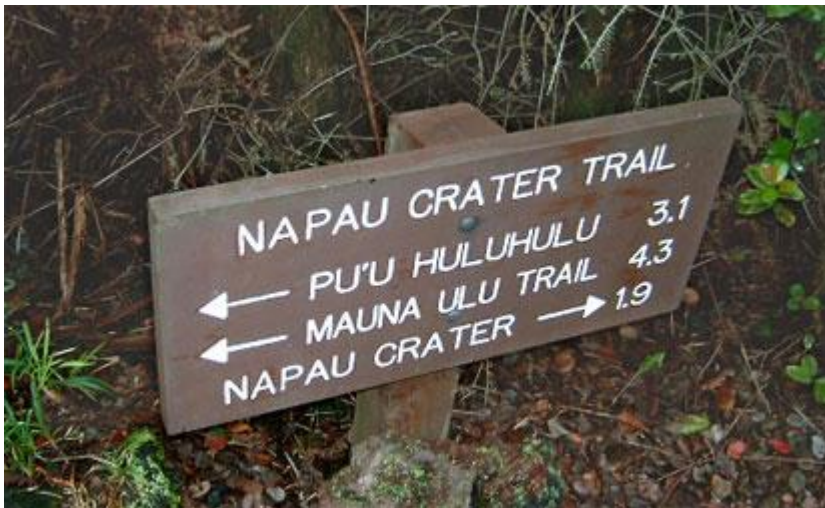
Ashley and Laura trudging through the mud.



Pulu Factory

After several miles of nothing but lava and vegetation, the walls of the old Pulu Factory came as an interesting surprise along the hike.





Only two more miles to Napau Crater!

The Campground

Around noon we reached a fork on the trail, and followed one side to the primitive campground and the long-awaited latrine (BYOTP). We retraced our steps back to the main trail and were soon on the edge of Napau Crater.



Without the overhead canopy, we had a better view of Pu'u O'o.

Napau Overlook

By 12:30 we were gazing across the expanse of Napau Crater and through the haze toward Pu'u O'o.





We reached the overlook just in time for lunch. After eating and taking care of oncoming blisters, we donned rain gear in response to the darkening skies.



Into the Crater

From the overlook, the trail heads northward and then follows a cascade of a'a lava into the crater. The descent was fairly steep, but only took about ten minutes.



Waiting for the rest of the group to reach the floor of the crater.

We followed the trail across the crater floor. The lava flow terrain in the crater is covered with a thin blanket of gravel-like tephra from the explosions of Pu'u O'o. We observed spatter ramparts, abundant reticulite, and a few patches of Pele's hair.



Reticulite

Reticulite is a pyroclastic deposit that collects in low spots in the crater. It has a glassy framework and consists of mostly empty space. The light material was very fragile and crumbled in our hands.



A reticulite-loving spider.

Crossing the Crater

After about an hour, we were hiking back up the crater towards the looming vent of Pu'u O'o.



Tephra Fields

At 2:00 we were hiking across large fields of tephra ejected from Pu'u O'o. It is important to follow the trail to avoid falling into cracks hidden by the blanket of tephra.



Trudging across the tephra in a drifting mist.

Solidified Flows

As we approached the looming vent, we encountered recent lava flows of glassy basalt spilling out in tongues across the tephra.



Students examine glassy shards of lava.



The End of the Trail

We were fairly disappointed when we reached the end of the trail without seeing any active flows. Signs placed by the Park Service indicated that hikers are not allowed on the flanks of Pu'u O'o due to hazardous conditions, including shelly pahoehoe and numerous cracks and fissures.



The closest view we could get of Pu'u O'o.

Hiking Back

We explored until 3:00 and then began the hike back across the Napau Crater in a light drizzle.



The Naulu Trail

Two hours and five miles later we reached a junction where the Naulu Trail intersects the Napau Crater Trail. The Naulu Trail leads 3.2 miles to the Kealakomo overlook, which was a shorter alternative to hiking the 5.5 miles back to our starting point. We sent a small group down the trail to drive the one vehicle we left at Kealakomo back to the Mauna Ulu trailhead and pick up the rest of our vehicles.



The Naulu Trail continued through more rain forest and then onto lava flows. We followed more rock cairns, but they were sometimes far apart, requiring us to stop and look around for them.



The “surprise” a ranger promised along the trail was a road covered by lava (the asphalt was welcome relief for our feet).

Kealakomo

We reached Chain of Craters Road by 6:30 and walked across the street to the Kealakomo picnic area and parking lot. Wet, muddy, and tired, we concluded our hike after ten hours, almost 20 miles of mud and lava, and countless spectacular views of Makaopuhi, Napau, and Pu'u O'o that were worth every step.



Laura excitedly points out the Kealakomo picnic area.